"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A CHRISTIAN RURAL LIFE PHILOSOPHY

By Edward K. Ziegler*

One who seeks a Christian basis for a philosophy of rural life finds himself entirely at home in the Gospels, and may find much of inspiration and counsel in the writings of such of the great Hebrew prophets as Amos, Micah and Jeremiah. Scores of the loveliest sayings and parables of Jesus, which illuminate and clarify great spiritual values, are couched in the idiom and imagery of the countryside. Nine-tenths of His metaphors are drawn from the life and language of the farmer. He grew up and spent the years of His ministry among a people predominantly rural. His soul was nurtured in the teachings of men whose life's high passion was social justice in terms of the will and purpose of God for a people living on and of the soil.

In seeking a Christian basis for any way of life, we must find it in terms of the Kingdom of God, which embraces the message of Jesus Christ for the life of man on the earth. The rule and purposes of God for man's life are the ultimate goals of all right living. A Christian philosophy of rural life must therefore find its ultimate standards of worth in the principles of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus Christ and lived by Him with the beloved community of His disciples. The Kingdom ideals of reverence for human personality, cooperation with God in the processes of creation and redemption, the practise and culture of brotherhood actuated by love among men, the development of the family as the divine unit of society, the holding of the gifts of God as a sacred stewardship or trust, the way of self-sacrificing, even suffering love as the ultimate way of life for all good men--these are the high points in a philosophy of life adequate to sustain and stabilize the life of rural Christian folk.

We Brethren have always been predominantly a rural folk. But in recent years, we have attempted, often with indifferent success, to transplant ourselves and our heritage to a city environment. While I firmly believe that what we have found to be a valid and true way of life for individuals and society can be transplanted to urban environment and there thrive, yet I believe that we can make our highest contribution to the sum total of Christian life and insight by keeping our roots deep in the soil, and by building under God the most perfect--and therefore Christian--rural brotherhoods of which we are capable. In the cities we lose our roots, and then we lose the sense of community, and the peculiar "Brotherhood" ideals of our common life and heritage. The trend among most Brethren thinkers today is toward strengthening our rural churches, and moving as rapidly and wisely as we can toward a restoration among us of the spiritual values of rural living.

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I deem it highly essential that we shall not return to rural life and to the profession of love for the soil merely in the spirit of a sentimental attachment to the farm, and an escape from a complex urban life which has become too much for us. We should have a real understanding of the spiritual values of rural life, of agriculture as a way of life, an appreciation of the privileges and the responsibilities of being a virile rural church, with a mission to all of the Christian world which grows out of our heritage.

In the highest possible sense, the agrarian trend in the Church of the Brethren ought to be "Rural Reconstruction" as the term was conceived in India by that great Christian statesman, K. T. Paul. The underlying basis of his thought was that through the industrial revolution, the exploitation of natural resources by a capitalist economy, and the consequent urbanization of the population, we have lost many of the best social, cultural, economic and spiritual values of rural life, and that it is possible and desirable to restore these values on a more enduring basis. This reconstruction will not be based upon a mere retreat from present systems, but upon a fresh discovery of the spiritual values and basing everything else on them.

I am pleading in this paper that we who in the past have had this rich rural Christian heritage shall stem the tide of migration toward the cities, and shall restore our rural church and community life on a higher and fairer basis then ever before. We shall do this, not out of a mere sentimental nostalgia for the good old days, but on a realistic basis of appreciation for rural life values and with the faith that only so can we make the fullest and most effective contribution to Christian life across the world, and find the highest of spiritual and cultural life for ourselves and for our children.

Truly there is hidden treasure of the Kingdom of God in the fields of rural life for Brethren seekers to uncover and restore to circulation. Let us dedicate ourselves to the discovery of these social, moral, economic, cultural and spiritual values, and, in finding them, find our own souls again. Let us dedicate ourselves to the propagation of these ideals and values. In our consideration of the Christian philosophy of rural life, we shall seek first an understanding of the values of agriculture as a way of life for Christian folk; we shall then proceed to evaluate the place of the rural Christian family and its development and nurture; we shall look at the larger relationships inherent in rural Christian living; and we shall see our work and life as a sacred stewardship of the Holy Earth.

AGRICULTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE OFFERING HIGH SPIRITUAL VALUES

Farming is far more than a way to make a living; it is far more than a process of getting something material with which to sustain life; it is a way of life which is worthy of high honor and respect because of the rich spiritual values inherent in it, and the limitless opportunities it affords for the moral, cultural and spiritual development of the persons and families who practise it. The farmer and his family cooperate with God in the creation of food for His children. The creative work of God is not finished. It goes on and on. Every day the age-old miracle of the multiplication of the loaves goes on in a million fields, that the children of God may eat. On the farms of the world, a thousand golden grains of corn are being made from one which was sown in the furrows of the land; ten bushels of potatoes are placed in an acre of ground, and in the mysterious working of God, three hundred bushels are produced. Fruit trees put forth their buds and are covered with a myriad lovely blossoms in all the pastel shades of spring, and then their boughs groan with a load of luscious fruit. Flax and cotton grow and bear their strong fibers that man may take and weave and fashion them into garments of beauty and enduring worth.

And in all these things, the farmer is God's partner. He cooperates with God, and his life is lived every day in the presence of miracle and mystery.

Another spiritual value of rural life is the encouragement it gives to simple living. The Christian farmer does not find it difficult to fit into the proper relationship with material things. He finds the satisfaction of his elemental needs on the farm. His understanding of the processes by which food and other goods are produced gives him proper perspective. Simplicity becomes the pattern of his life. And if we are to be rural Christian folk, we will seek most earnestly to maintain the ideal of simplicity of speech, dress, furnishing of our homes, and expenditure for the things which make life comfortable. The Brethren emphasis on simplicity of life is a Christian emphasis. In our rural life we must keep it central, and we can there keep it central.

The Christian farmer finds spiritual value in the life processes around him. The processes of germination of seed and of the procreation of his cattle and poultry give him the perspective of continuity of life. His thinking is in terms of the continuity of life, of the past and future, not merely of present needs and satisfactions. Stability and vision are the spiritual fruits of an understanding Christian approach to the processes of nature. And with them comes the birth of hope and faith in God. Whoever plants seed, and then, seeing a crop withered by drought or eaten by locusts, goes right on in faith year after year sowing his seed learns the lesson of faith in God and hope. The constantly changing circumstances under which he works develop within him a creativeness and inventiveness which are unique. He learns the meaning and the dignity of hard labor, for on the farm it is surrounded with meaning and beauty. He must of necessity be his own master, and must learn to make his own decisions. The Christian farmer develops a wholesome spirit of self-reliance.

The highest values of the Kingdom of God are found more fully and are more nearly attainable in farming than in any other occupation or way of life. It offers the finest possibility for a people to develop Christian family, social and church life. Some of these high values are summed up in a brief paragraph by O. E. Baker in "The National Welfare and Rural Urban Migration in the U.S.A": "I would that rural youth of today could see agriculture as the great preserver of culture and the earth as the mother of mankind.....If civilization is to survive, the young people must achieve a sense of the continuity of life; they must realize that the individual is only a link in an endless chain that reaches back through the geologic ages. I would that the rural youth could see in front of them the opportunity to build not an urban but a new rural civilization--a civilization founded not on selfishness but on brotherly affection, in which the economic objective is to produce sufficient for everyone while conserving the natural resources, and in which the social objective is service rather than vanity."

The final values of agriculture as a way of life are spiritual, not material. The Christian farmer will rarely become a rich man. He will not find opulence but the satisfaction of cooperation with God, an enriched spiritual life, a finer opportunity to rear his family and build a true Christian home, an opportunity to be always creative and never a parasite, to create food and things of intrinsic worth rather than to be a destroyer. The first great treasure then in a Christian philosophy of rural life is that agriculture offers a way of life rich in spiritual values.

THE RURAL HOME AS A SETTING FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

One of the most important emphases throughout the years of our history as a

church has been on a high quality of family life. No church nor community can rise higher than the level of its homes. That way of life in which family life can best thrive is certainly most desirable and most likely to contribute to the maintenance of our civilization. It is significant that the high ideals of home and family life, of solidarity, home cooperation, and of mutual respect are found most prominently in rural homes.

John La Farge, S.J., says, "We honor farming as a way of life, because agriculture provides the best setting for the home, because it encourages home virtues, makes for stability and purity of family life, the foundation upon which society is built, the milieu in which the individual receives the best start in any form of life that he may later embrace, and that proves itself the best form of life for the majority of human beings. Where do we differ in this from the best Protestant tradition, or the immemorial traditions of Israel?"*

Brethren people share this view. The predominance of rural people in our membership and the high quality of home life we have maintained are inextricably interrelated. The really typical Dunker home has been a rural home. And those urban Dunker homes which have best preserved their spiritual heritage are those which have kept as much of rural values as possible.

Charles J. Galpin says of the rural Christian home: "The rural home and family stand today, therefore, before church and nation as the American type. The city family, much as we may deplore the fact, has long ceased to be the type family. The farm home is holding the family idea in the nation, almost at the last ditch, it must be conceded. This is the first basic reason why rural life has national social significance, why the farmer has a role of honor in American Christendom."**

The farm offers the finest opportunity for real Christian family life because, in the first place, it offers the most healthful of environment. Fresh air, wholesome, home-produced foodstuffs, exercise and room to live and work and play under ideal circumstances make for better health. The availability of adequate medical care is no longer a problem in most rural communities. Furthermore, economic conditions are more favorable to family life in rural areas. It is hardly possible for a man to operate a farm without a wife. Their cooperation makes possible a relatively independent and self-sufficient economic unit. Children in the farm family are not an unrelieved economic liability. In urban life the question of having children is always influenced by the fact of their being a continued economic burden. But children on the farm learn to share in the lighter tasks, thus not only learning the art and dignity of labor, but also becoming economic assets.

The farmer during the early years of his mature life is able to have and rear a family of children because of these conditions, while the city-dweller feels it necessary to achieve more of economic sufficiency before having children. Hence, we have a far greater likelihood of an adequate family in rural homes during the earlier years, when it is most desirable biologically as well. The population trends indicate that urban families do not produce enough children to perpetuate urban population, while the rural areas produce more than enough. The cities are parasites on the rural areas, drawing constantly from them the new blood to perpetuate themselves, and under present policies and trends, the more able farm youth are often those attracted to the city.

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*Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin No. 27-2, "Agriculture as a Way of Life - The Catholic Point of View," page 2.

**Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin No. 37, "The Rural Church," page 3.

The highest reaches of Christian family life are developed in those homes where parents and children cooperate and share in common tasks, common recreation and common social and religious life. How infinitely greater the opportunities for such common life are in farming than in urban life needs no demonstration. The solidarity of the family is much more easily conserved in rural than in urban life. Through this common life children have the constant and varied contacts with their parents which develop understanding, mutual respect and the finest opportunities for effective, informal education in character, morals, habits of industry and thrift, and religion.

O. E. Baker has effectively stated the close relationship between land and family life in his article, "The National Welfare and Rural Urban Migration in the U.S.A." as follows: "For the better utilization of our arable land I have full faith only in the family farm, and in the family farm only in the case of the family with continuity of life and occupancy of the land. And continuity of family life and of land occupancy is dependent on a philosophy of life, or, if you prefer, on religious belief. There will not be, I fear, much better utilization of farm land in the United States until more farmers pass the farms on to their sons, and these sons continue to operate the farms, expecting, in turn, to pass the farms on to their sons. The rapid decline in the birthrate associated with the urbanization of the people suggests strongly that land and life are closely related. It is becoming clear that the land is the foundation of the family and that the family is the foundation of the State."

The future stability of the Christian church and basically the Christian home, in America, is dependent upon continuity and security in ownership of land in units of the family-sized farm. This has always been fundamental in Brethren economy, and I believe it must at all costs be preserved. Around many Brethren country churches, farms which have been in Brethren families for many generations are being sold to non-Brethren, and Brethren youth are drifting off to the cities as laborers, office-workers or skilled artisans. Here is one of our major problems, to find ways in which Brethren youth who will dedicate themselves to rural life may be financed by character loans from older Brethren, that they may buy farms and continue thereby our rural Christian family tradition.

BUILDING THE RURAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Not only does agriculture as a way of life provide the most favorable setting for the nurture of the Christian family, it is also the source of the highest civic and national ideals. It has been aptly said that democracy can scarcely succeed in a great city because there is no sense of community there. President Theodore Roosevelt, in a letter to Liberty Hyde Bailey in 1908, setting up the Country Life Commission, said, "If there is one lesson taught by history, it is that the permanent greatness of any state must ultimately depend more upon the character of its country population than upon anything else. No growth of cities, no growth of wealth, can make up for loss in either the number or the character of the farming population."

Democracy will succeed in America if we can keep it alive in the life of our rural peoples. It will not succeed in the great cities alone. Nor can it succeed if the trend toward absentee ownership, tenancy, proletarianism and share-cropping is not speedily and effectively checked. Any nation which allows its rural life to deteriorate will perish.

I believe that the maintenance of those virtues and values which make rural life the bulwark of our national culture can not be dependent upon economic factors alone.

One of the great lessons learned in the Rural Reconstruction movement in India has been that when economic factors alone are stressed, or even in conjunction with concern about health and literacy, results were disappointing and impermanent. As Paul Harrison, the famous missionary doctor of Arabia, so aptly says, "It is not enough merely to patch the holes in a man's shirt." We must in our efforts to make rural life thoroughly Christian not only change the rural environment and lift economic burdens, we must change the individual. The rural Christian community must be built up of rural Christian persons.

Having made sure that our emphasis in building the rural Christian home and neighborhood that we have a well-balanced approach which stresses the spiritual aspects of rural life as well as economic, we may give our attention to the religious aspects of the community life. Christian farmers in a neighborhood will be deeply concerned not only that their individual and family life shall be lived on a spiritual plane, but that all of their community and wider relationships shall be on the levels of the Kingdom of God also. The rural neighborhood ought to be based on cooperation rather than on competition. In many areas in America, the cooperatives are very active, and have lifted farm community relationships to a new high level. We still have much to learn and far to go in applying the cooperative principle to farm community problems, but we are headed in the right direction. The Christian farmers of a community will have an alert conscience about practices which would be detrimental to their fellows in the immediate community, as well as in the wider community. They will study the possibilities of new crops, and the problems of marketing, not only in the light of immediate self-interest, but in the light of the rights and the needs of other farmers and of the needs and the ultimate good of the consumers as well.

It hardly seems possible that Christian farmers could consent to wanton destruction of foods--fruits, milk, meats, etc., through mistaken policies of government, when there are millions of hungry children here and there who need just those things. A Christian farm community will seek ways to make sure that the good gifts of the earth will be used for the benefit of all mankind, and not hoarded for the selfish gain of the few. Even in the immediate neighborhood, a farm community which is Christian would not be able to see persons in the neighborhood in want, and permit them to suffer when the barns and cellars of the neighborhood are full of food.

A Christian rural community will find many channels through which brotherhood can be expressed and consolidated. There will be cooperation not only in the buying and selling of goods, but in cultural pursuits also. True rural reconstruction will restore some of the neighborhood social and cultural and educational enterprises which in the past were carried on as community projects. One of the problems which must be resolutely faced in the building of a rural Christian neighborhood is the tendency to go off to the nearest city for all entertainment and social life. No real community life is possible so long as the major interests outside of the home are all met in the city rather than in the countryside.

This leads finally to what I consider the most important of rural Christian community organizations, the church. The church may well be the center of the rural neighborhood. It once was so; it is so now in some neighborhoods where the church has met the challenge of commercialized recreation and the attractions of urban social life with a program which has attracted the youth and adults of the countryside. The rural church has one great function: the leading of the people of the rural neighborhood into such fellowship and communion with God as will transform their lives and make them good and attractive neighbors to each other, as well as good stewards of the Holy Earth. But this is a function capable of very wide interpretation. It means far more than merely having a service once a Sunday, and an evangelistic meeting once a

year. A church which will meet the real spiritual needs of the people of the rural community will become the center of the very life of the people. It will bring the Gospel of Christ to bear upon all the personal, social and community problems of the people, helping them to see the implications of the Gospel for their problems, and drawing them to the Christ who can solve them. The church, if it be a true church, unites people on the highest levels into a closely-knit fellowship which will not disintegrate under the strains and tensions of our modern life, or when confronted with the allurements of urban forms of recreation and temptation. The church can restore to rural life the stability, dignity and sweetness which it should have, and did have in the finest days of the past. But to do so, it must be alive. It must have a program of worship which will lead farm people into the very presence of God. It must have a warmth of brotherhood which will make it very difficult for even the more wayward of the flock to stray far away from the fold.

The church which attracts, holds and transforms rural folk must have an adequate leadership. The rural minister has a tremendous field which challenges his very best. It is never right to consider a rural church to be a mere stepping stone to get into a city church. Fortunately, our own church has been remarkably free from this kind of error. Our ministers for the most part have considered the country church their rightful and permanent field of labor. But to meet the challenges of our day, we need ministers who will understand the full implications of the Gospel for our time and land. I believe that whether or not the free ministry survives, our leaders in the rural churches must be men who have had training both in religion and in rural living. They must be men who can win and hold the respect of farmer folk, not only as experts in the field of religion, but as men who are sympathetic to and understand and love country life.

The church can do a useful work in helping, through the development of worship programs and a rural Christian year, to apply religion to the every-day life of the farm home and family. Even in America the church has helped at times to secularize the life of the farmer. This has been true in marked degree in some of the younger churches, but to some extent also in America. It is high time that the church shall, through her services of worship, an adequate leadership and a program of service to the community, take her rightful place as a moulder of the Christian life of the rural community.

STEWARDSHIP OF THE HOLY EARTH

The fourth major point in my Christian philosophy of rural life is the stewardship of the Holy Earth. I am indebted for this term to Liberty Hyde Bailey, whose classic statement entitled "The Holy Earth" has left all rural thinkers in his eternal debt. The earth is in a very real sense holy, and our relation to it takes on new meaning as we sense the significance of it in the plan of God. The earth is not our own. It is God's earth, for He created and sustains it. He saw that it was very good, and it is still a good and kindly earth. Where in the Gospels can one find any inkling that Jesus considered the earth cursed? On the contrary, he lived close to the soil, and the processes of seedtime and harvest were familiar and dear to him. He thought of the earth as productive, sometimes thirty-fold, sometimes sixty, sometimes a hundred-fold. He thought of it as having life within itself, causing the seed sown in it to spring up and bear fruit. He had only respect and love for those who tilled the soil. The earth is the Lord's and, because it is, we are in a unique relation to Him when we are tillers of His earth. Through it God feeds and clothes and supplies the daily needs of his children everywhere. He still orders and sustains it. He still sends the sunshine and rain, the seedtime and harvest.

This is not paganism. The pagan thought was not that the earth is a sacred trust

given to us by God, but that it in itself was a goddess to be worshipped, often with magical rites as in the fertility cults of the ancient East. Our emphasis today on the Holy Earth is a new appreciation of the hand of the Creator, and a sense of our sacred stewardship of the rich natural resources which He has entrusted to us in the earth. That is not paganism. It is in the finest tradition of the Hebrew prophets and of our Lord Himself.

If the earth is holy, then man's relation to it is at once put upon the plane of ethics and religion, rather than mere economics. What should man's relation be to the earth? Usually in the past, and far too widely today, his relation is that of the exploiter. But exploitation has become almost synonymous with destruction. And we Americans have been at the forefront in destructive exploitation of natural resources of soil, forests, fish and other products of the good earth. Nathaniel Shaler, the famous geologist of Harvard University, said many years ago, "Of all the sinful wasters of man's inheritance in the earth--and in this regard all are sinners the very worst are the people of America." With our high-powered machines we have exploited without regard to consequences, and have laid waste vast areas of our land We have brought upon ourselves the curse of drought, famine, dust-storms, impoverishment and desolation by our wasteful use of the plant, animal and soil resources of the earth. They are not acts of God, but sins of man. It is time to call a halt.

The Christian view of land is love for it because it is the Creator's handiwork, entrusted to us as a sacred stewardship. Proper handling of the land will be put on the basis not of economic advantage, but of religious motivation. Let the Christian church in the rural areas of America lift up her voice with strength to proclaim that the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and that we are stewards of it. And if the rural Christian folk of our land accept that stewardship it will transform agriculture and enrich and dignify it as a way of life. He will hold gifts of the Holy Earth which he recognizes as the gifts of God as a trust to be shared and used for the glory of God and the welfare of mankind.

CONCLUSION

I believe that these convictions about farming as a way of life are basic. I believe that under God the Christian farmers in the Church of the Brethren and other churches can change the trends of life in America, and can redeem our rural life for Him. I believe that, as Jefferson said, those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God. I believe that the highest life possible to man in our beautiful and richly-endowed land is the life of the rural folk who find in farming a way of life rich with spiritual values. I believe that the rural home offers the best possible setting for the development of the Christian family at its highest and best, and that without the strengthening of the Christian family in the rural areas our civilization is doomed. I believe that the new democracy which shall arise out of the ruins of the old when the holocaust of this war is over will find its roots in rural life and in the virtues and values cherished always by rural peoples in their homes and their community relationships with each other. I believe that the rural church has the God-given privilege and power of inspiring the rural folk with these ideals and filling them with vision and power to translate them into real living. And I believe that the key to the highest appreciation of God's world and its treasures, which will enrich and dignify the life of rural peoples everywhere is the acceptance of it as the Holy Earth, and of its stewardship as a sacred trust, to be discharged in the fear of and cooperation with Almighty God.

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